

Karen E. Moynihan

# A Collectibles Project: Engaging Students in Authentic Multimodal Research and Writing

High school teacher Karen E. Moynihan creates a multimodal project inspired by the creative nonfiction style of *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean. Students choose a collectible item and immerse themselves in the subculture of the collectors. The project includes participation in library and field research, interviews, photography and graphic design, process journals, peer editing and drafting of a final story with integrated research, and PowerPoint presentations.

Summer reading for Advanced Placement English Language and Composition provided the inspiration for a multimodal, researched project that has proven to be both educational and fun. Students read *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean—an account of the scheme to plunder the ghost orchid from Florida’s Fakahatchee Strand and the subsequent trial of the accused, John Laroche. Expanding on her original story “Orchid Fever,” which was published in 1995 in *The New Yorker*, Orlean immersed herself in the orchid culture. She interviewed Laroche as well as orchid lovers and thieves, botanists, historians, and business owners. She tapped the expertise of the American Orchid Society, orchid judges, and many collectors, and she waded into the Fakahatchee in search of the elusive ghost orchid. The book contains research from multiple genres in addition to history and botany texts; Orlean used police columns, crime statistics, court transcripts, newspaper articles, advertisements, interviews, conversations, and personal back-story. Orlean described orchid collecting as a religion. According to Laroche, collecting gives life meaning. Orlean set out to find out what it was like to care about something passionately and to experience the passion that Laroche described.

The inspiration for the multimodal project I designed came from questions at the end of Orlean’s book in “Topics for Discussion”: “What, besides orchids, could generate a book like this? Are there other subcultures or other objects of desire that might be as provocative?” The possibilities began to perco-

late in the back of my mind. Students would choose a collectible and do real-life research leading to the creation of an investigative report. Following Orlean’s model, they would immerse themselves in a subculture and examine it from multiple vantage points. They, too, would wade into the swamp. There would be no voiceless, formula-driven “term paper” at the end of this process, no cutting and pasting. This hands-on project would breathe and sing. It would be fun!

“Fun!” my students said, their breathing shallow, panic rising like swamp water as they looked at the assignment packet. “One step at a time,” I told them. “Once you have done all the field work, the paper will practically write itself.” Taking my cue from Jeffrey D. Wilhelm’s mantra, “You Gotta BE the Book,” I told students that they had to enter and see the world of the collector, relate to the collector, elaborate, connect, and reflect (46–47). They had to BE the collector. The work they produced would be a piece of creative nonfiction in the style of Orlean. For students used to writing objective, third-person reports, this was new territory, far from what Tom Romano calls the “many mythical features of good writing for academic audiences” (63). Students would begin not with a thesis but with a quest for answers. Says Romano, “Sometimes writers are better off unfolding a story and revealing surprises to the reader. Sometimes they are better off posing a dilemma, then exploring and

**There would be no voiceless, formula-driven “term paper” at the end of this process, no cutting and pasting. This hands-on project would breathe and sing. It would be fun!**

discussing it" (64). Students would write in first person, using their natural diction and humor. They would tell a story, embed their research in the story, and insert opinion based on their research, observations, and personal experiences. They would use the resources of language they had observed in *The Orchid Thief*: image, metaphor, diction, and tone. They would describe the culture, people, experiences, passion, and strategies of the collectors; the time, effort, and cost of collecting; and the rewards, both financial and otherwise. Finally, students would draw a conclusion about the value of the activity to the collector and to society.

### Beginning the Project

The first task was to choose a collectible. All possibilities were open. I asked students if they or anyone they knew collected anything, or if they had an interest in any particular collectible. We brainstormed, thinking about objects that held any particular memory or meaning for them, or any objects they were curious about from the standpoint of history and manufacturing. Our students come from the inner city and from thirty-five towns within commuting distance of the school. We are a private institution with a diverse population. These students watch the Discovery network and *Antiques Roadshow*. Their families have attics, basements, and storage areas waiting to be explored. Baseball cards and Barbies came up right away, but after thinking overnight, students came back with Depression glass, Beanie Babies, vinyl records, comic books, stamps, coins, bottles, blown glass, Annalee dolls, PEZ dispensers, seashells, political buttons, train sets, and Hummels. Topics also included military vehicles, nativity sets, and even AOL disks.

I decided to start this project at the beginning of the first semester. The twelve-week schedule included two long weekends in fall weather conducive to field research and the Thanksgiving holiday weekend when students could find blocks of time to write. The paper was due the second week in December. PowerPoint presentations began a day later and concluded before Christmas vacation. On the day that I introduced this project, the students read through the packet that listed requirements, described the process, and prescribed

the grading rubric. In those initial days we reviewed note-taking skills, documentation in MLA format, and the necessity of scrupulous accuracy in citing sources. The schedule for this project provided school time for library visits, in-class work sessions, peer editing, and conferencing. However, much of the work had to be done outside the daily school routine. Students had to stay on task to submit the project's required components on time. Frequent check-ins prevented procrastination and allowed students to ask questions and solve problems along the way. Said a student in her reflection, "I feel that having certain elements due periodically was a great idea. I know that that helped to keep me working. I never went a whole week without touching my paper or doing some research because another due date was always creeping up. Without those due dates, I feel I may have left everything for the last second, and that would have been tragic." In *A Teacher's Guide to the Multi-genre Research Project: Everything You Need to Get Started*, Melinda Putz suggests giving the students a Process Journal handout to record their daily progress. Using her template, students kept track of their discoveries about their collectible, about the research process, about writing, and about any other thoughts and reactions (36). This record would be helpful when it came time for students to do their PowerPoint presentations and to write their reflections about the entire project. The schedule for the project is shown in Figure 1.

### Seeking Sources

The first component—library research—required students to access print resources. Our school librarian collaborated with me to set up a display of books on the psychology of collecting and on popular collectibles. The display also included price guides and how-to books for navigating eBay and other auction sites. The project required a minimum of two print resources. Students who had previously eschewed their school or public libraries in favor of Internet research were forced to negotiate the online card catalogue and the Dewey Decimal System. They confessed that the human interaction expected of library patrons intimidated them. They feared asking for help in their public libraries, not wanting to appear foolish or out of

**FIGURE 1.** Schedule of Activities and Due Dates

This researched paper contains many required components. You are responsible for advance planning and managing your time well. The due dates below will help you to stay on task. **At each due date, including the topic due date, you must submit your process journal and your notes.**

September 21	Introduction
September 22	Library Day
September 26	Topic is due; begin gathering the information you will need to create your graphic design
September 28	Library Day
October 6	Submit research from print resources
October 11	Library Day
October 17	Submit Internet research with Web site evaluations
October 27	Submit field research
November 3	Library Day
November 7	Submit interview
November 16	Submit creative element
November 22	Submit photography and graphic designs
November 30	First Draft and Works Cited Page are due
November 30, December 1 and 4 December 7 and 8	Peer editing days
December 11	Library Days to work on PowerPoint
December 11	Final Product is due with all required elements and Process Journal
December 12	PowerPoint presentations begin

place. Soon students were singing the praises of Interlibrary Loan and their friendly and helpful reference librarians. Said one student in his reflection, "I did the unthinkable. I asked for help. To my surprise I wasn't belittled or scoffed at. The librarian was more than happy to help me and found another book in no time."

The second research component returned the students to their comfort zone—the Internet. To ensure that they used reliable Web sites, I asked students to fill out a critical evaluation form developed by Kathy Schrock for each Web site they planned to use for their project, with a minimum of two Web sites required. I warned students against providing any personal information over the Internet in their quest for information from collectors. Students found manufacturers' Web sites, government Web sites, and official Web sites dedicated to their collectibles, and they also found collector

forums with information and support for other collectors. All of these sites could be useful, but students had to distinguish those sites that provided valid, authentic information from those personal Web pages that provided a picture of a collector and the collector's mindset. The following is a student's sample narrative evaluation of a collector's Web site: "Barbiecollector.com is an excellent resource because it gives information and the history of the Barbie doll directly from Mattel, so the site is trustworthy. It is easy to navigate, and I had no difficulty with loading images or searching for information. The graphics are excellent and the site is constantly updated, especially because you can buy collectible Barbies, and new dolls are always added." Another evaluation from a student who recognized that the Web site was not reliable for historical information but was valuable for her purposes stated, "JoFreeman.com contains an article written by Jo Freeman for *Ms Magazine* in August 1977. Though the article is old and biased, it is opinion based. I am using it for the subjective content so these criteria [technical content, authenticity, authority, bias, and subject content] do not affect my purpose."

The third component involved field research and interviews. Students went to museums, specialty shops, hobby shops, antique fairs, yard sales, trade shows, collector club meetings, flea markets, conventions, artist studios, and any other place they could find their collectibles on display. I cautioned students to travel with a companion and to approach strangers respectfully. Once again, students found that if they told the people they met about their project, collectors were not only happy to talk about their collections but also generously gave away some collectibles, introduced students to other collectors, and suggested other places to visit. A student writing about political buttons came away from a collectors' show at the local VFW with photos and quite a few more buttons pinned to her denim jacket, gifts from her new friends.

**The third component involved field research and interviews. Students went to museums, specialty shops, hobby shops, antique fairs, yard sales, trade shows, collector club meetings, flea markets, conventions, artist studios, and any other place they could find their collectibles on display.**

Another student went to a comic book convention and recorded her observations:

What was very interesting was the intent of the public. I observed people with lists, frantically flipping through boxes to find the one that their collection begged for so heartily. I saw people haggle over prices, and a few disappointed faces when they realized no one had the one comic they had traveled to find. I watched expressive vendors trying to entice a good conversation and purchase, while other vendors simply sat and watched to make sure nothing was taken without proper payment. I saw everyone from the excited kid to the overzealous old man. I couldn't believe I hadn't found this special club of collectors sooner. Their company was warm and welcoming.

Though students could have conducted all of their field research locally, some students decided to take their projects on the road. Students traveled to the Annalee Doll Factory in Meredith, New Hampshire, and the PEZ factory in Orange, Connecticut. The student writing about Barbie dolls went to KB Toys at a nearby mall the day after Thanksgiving to observe the rush. They were starting to have fun.

In conducting interviews, students again found collectors eager to help. The student writing about seashells went to the Web site for the Conchologists of America and posted a request on their message board asking for anyone willing to be interviewed for her project. She received seven immediate responses and many more in the ensuing days. She had designed her questions so that they could be answered in a sentence or even a word, but she was surprised by how detailed the responses were. In her reflection she wrote, "Some people actually told me their life story and just answered my questions as they told their story. It was fascinating reading all of their stories. These interviews were really my favorite part of the assignment. . . . I was able to learn a lot from these people, and one of the cool things about them was that they are from all around the world. I talked to collectors from Florida, England, Belgium, Hawaii, California, Czechoslovakia, and many other places." The girl researching Barbie dolls had trouble finding an adult to interview until the theater teacher at school mentioned that one of her teachers from Saint Michael's College in Vermont collected the dolls. Not only did the collector/teacher agree to be

interviewed by email, but he also sent the student photos from his collection of hundreds of Barbie dolls set up in scenes such as "Barbie Goes to the Museum" or "Barbie Goes to the Beauty Shop."

While some students conducted interviews by email, some arranged to meet collectors through contacts they had made, and others, such as the student writing about Depression glass and another writing about stamps, took the opportunity to talk to grandparents about lifelong passions. The grandmother who collected Depression glass had some items on display, but most of her collection was packed away. She and her granddaughter spent a Saturday afternoon unpacking the glass and setting it up for a photo session. With each piece they unwrapped, the granddaughter heard another piece of family history or the story of where and when her grandmother had acquired the piece. In her reflection this young woman wrote, "In the process of writing and researching for this paper, I learned a great deal about Depression glass, but more importantly I got to bond with Nana. I loved to see her get excited about telling me the stories of her past and enjoyed spending hours trying to identify each piece that I had photographed." The student who spent many days with her grandfather going over his extensive stamp collection wrote, "I loved the bonding time it [the project] created for my grandfather and me. That truly transcends everything that I did with the paper."

## Designing the Product

The next requirement was photography and graphic design. Students had to take photos using a digital camera, an SLR camera, or a disposable camera. Because students were required to construct their own visual arguments, the photos could not be downloaded from a Web site or cut out of a magazine. The photos worked to enhance the written text and to reinforce a position or idea. Students recorded the time, place, subject, and other information needed for documentation. While some students affixed photos to their pages, most imported digital photos into their manuscripts and used the word-wrap function and included captions. The photos also appeared in their PowerPoint presentations. Students took photos of collectors they interviewed and the collections themselves. The student writing about blown glass introduced himself to a gallery

owner in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and told her about his project. She allowed him to take photographs in the gallery and gave him contact information for many of the artists who exhibited in the gallery so that he could contact them for interviews. The manager of a toy store, also charmed by the project, allowed a student to take photos in the doll aisle. Students took pictures of sports memorabilia in personal collections, of labeled storage bins and boxes in collectors' closets, of yard sales and flea markets, and of a twelve-year-old's PEZ collection that lined his bedroom walls from floor to ceiling.

For their graphic designs, students conducted a survey of such concerns as availability, price, condition, the most desired, the rarest, the most common, the average cost, and the highest and the lowest prices

paid. Students were not to download this graph. They had to track items on eBay or another reliable site or research the statistical information they needed and create a computer-generated table, chart, diagram, spreadsheet, bar graph, line graph, map, or pie chart. The designs students created were colorful and informative; for example, a bar graph of the most expensive collectible vinyl records, a column graph of PEZ values, a pie chart of Barbie's careers from 1959 to 2002, a spreadsheet of release dates for state quarters, and a map with lines tracing the evolution of the Nativity set. Students inserted these designs into their texts (see figs. 2 and 3). Their decisions in creating and placing the designs centered on making sure the visual argument enhanced their written argument and did not interrupt the flow of their ideas.

FIGURE 2. Tim's Column Graphs

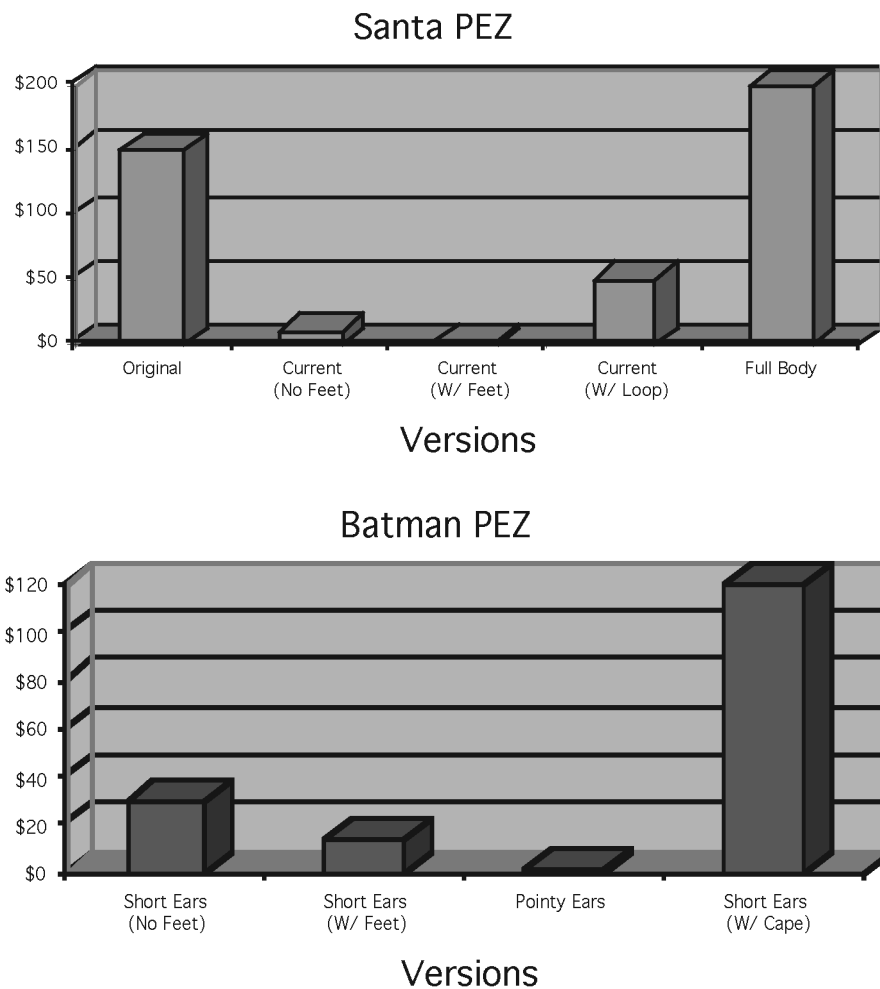
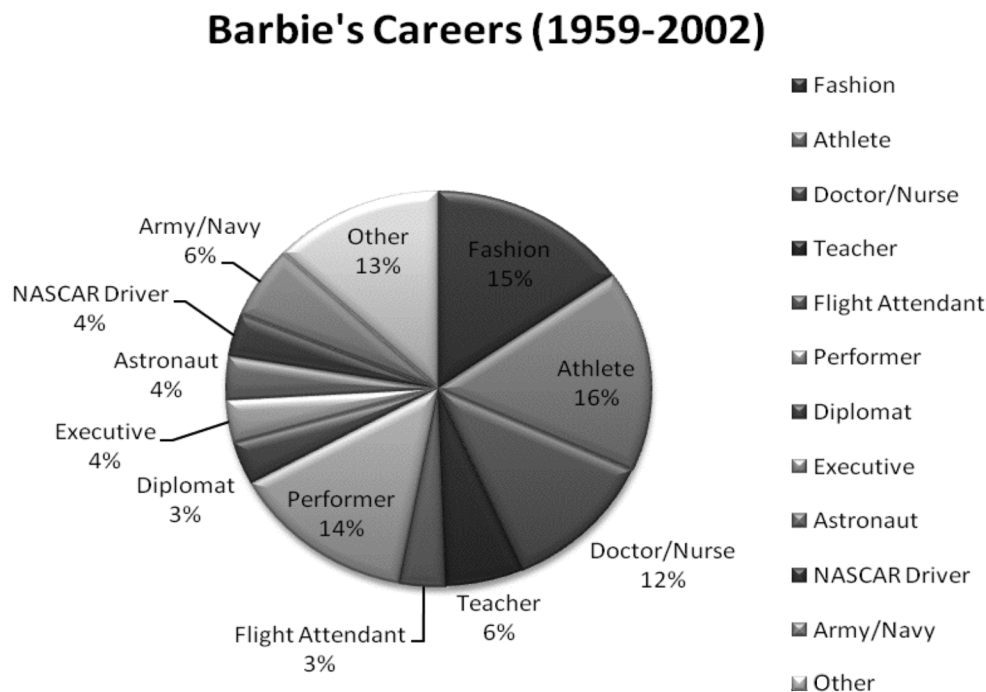




FIGURE 3. Patricia's Pie Chart



### Creating an Element

The final element was the creative element of the student's choice. It could be created in any genre or medium. This requirement produced some terrific

**After thinking about their collectibles and immersing themselves in the culture for two months, students found that once they started to write, they couldn't get the words down fast enough.**

poems, artwork, parodies, dialogues, advertisements, and newspaper articles. The student writing about seashells created a clay model of a shell; the student researching AOL disks created a disk; the student writing about comic books drew a page of comics; and the student writing about blown glass traveled to a glass-blower's studio for a lesson in

glass blowing. He blew a vase and brought it to class, proud of his handiwork. Now he had fun.

### Writing and Editing Final Products

With each due date, I checked the students' work, their process journals, and their documentation. Students emulated *The Orchid Thief* in organizing

their investigative experiences and divided their work into sections or chapters. After thinking about their collectibles and immersing themselves in the culture for two months, students found that once they started to write, they couldn't get the words down fast enough. Their biggest difficulty was deciding how to order the various parts of their stories. A second challenge was writing in first person but embedding research into the story. Said one student, "I had to write about both my research and my personal experience at the same time. I had never been required to write about both in the same paper; it has always been one or the other." From another student: "I learned that writing is very pliable. You can write a paragraph and think it fits where you stuck it, and then a few days later read it, wonder what you were thinking, and move it to a totally different location. I feel like this paper, more than anything else I've ever written, has allowed my true voice and style to come through. This paper definitely allowed me to grow as a writer."

We scheduled three days for peer editing. For the first two days, students brought their first drafts

to class and swapped manuscripts. As students read, they provided feedback by filling out a peer evaluation sheet that addressed organization, diction, voice, tone, the placement and effectiveness of photographs and graphic elements, and the argument. Students commented on what ideas needed further explanation, what holes needed to be filled, and what they liked best. After receiving feedback from two readers, students went home to review, add, subtract, reorder, and rewrite. We spent the third peer-editing day on grammar and mechanics, focusing on changing passive voice constructions to active voice, changing weak linking verbs to action verbs wherever possible, eliminating adverbs, and checking pronoun references, modifiers, and punctuation. Students were ready to finish their final drafts. The choices of fonts and colors, the chapter titles, the placement of illustrations, and the creation of the cover all contributed to the final manuscript form. Finally, a double check of their documentation and MLA form ensured that their research was duly credited to their sources.

Students spent the last two days before their papers were due in the library creating PowerPoint slides for their presentations. Each student would have approximately fifteen minutes to present the key points of his or her research. The slides would contain photographs and bulleted talking points, no more than ten words per slide. With a word limit, students could not simply read their slides to the class. They had to talk about their collectibles and their discoveries and answer questions from their classmates. Their animation in describing their collectibles and their research processes and discoveries indicated the satisfaction and pride they felt in their work. As word got out in the school about the presentations, we had visitors who had to see what all the excitement was about. The student who wrote about pipe collecting added a DVD to her PowerPoint presentation. She had interviewed her father about his pipe collection while her brother taped the proceedings. The DVD showed close-up images of the pipes as well as an explanation of how to load a pipe with tobacco, tamp it down, light the pipe, and puff. Curious about women who smoke pipes and unable to find a woman to interview, the student had decided to ask her father to teach her how to

smoke a pipe. There she was on the DVD with her dad, smoking a pipe.

The students' written reflections proved to be an affirmation of this multimodal approach. A student who had contemplated dropping Advanced Placement English wrote, "I have never really been pushed out of my comfort zone for a school related project before this assignment.

I don't think that if it hadn't been required of me, I would have gone out of my way to meet total strangers. . . . If I had dropped this before the end of first quarter, then I wouldn't be here to say that I'm glad I did all these ridiculously uncomfortable things."

A student who had written about model trains wrote, "At first I was intimidated by the idea that I would have to actually get out there and engulf myself in the world of trains. But after I had talked with someone or visited a place, I would feel a sense of accomplishment. I enjoyed the research process because it was so much different from anything I had ever done in school. I felt that it showed how dedicated I was to the topic and proved my determination in finding what I needed to know." Finally, from this student who admitted she had had fun: "What surprised me about this paper was that I had fun. I know it was supposed to be a fun assignment, but I truly doubted this idea. However, when I started writing, trying to create a piece of creative nonfiction ended up being an interesting challenge. I was shocked!"

On the day students submitted their projects, proud and relieved, I handed out stationery and envelopes and asked students to write thank-you notes to the people who had helped them in their research. I carried home two canvas bags full of their projects and corrected the papers using the rubric. I wrote a two-page evaluation of each paper. After all the students had accomplished, they deserved extensive feedback. The evaluation included an assessment of all the elements: the print and Internet

**As students read, they provided feedback by filling out a peer evaluation sheet that addressed organization, diction, voice, tone, the placement and effectiveness of photographs and graphic elements, and the argument. Students commented on what ideas needed further explanation, what holes needed to be filled, and what they liked best.**

resources, the field research, the interviews, the photographs and the graphic designs, the creative element, the manuscript form and documentation, the PowerPoint presentation, and their reflection. I added comments on their style—voice, syntax, diction, organization, transitions, vivid expression of idea, grammar and mechanics—and their content—research, evidence, point of view, critical and creative thinking, and discoveries. I enjoyed the task of correcting papers. I recalled the kind of term paper I had been assigned “back in the day” and considered the authentic research my students had engaged in and the thoughtful writing they had produced, and I rejoiced. Orlean said, “For me, part of the process of writing is the journey to understanding” (288). The journey my students took in this project on col-

lectibles led to their discoveries and understandings and to more confidence in themselves, their abilities, and their voices.

#### Works Cited

- Orlean, Susan. *The Orchid Thief*. 1998. New York: Ballantine, 2000.
- Putz, Melinda. *A Teacher's Guide to the Multigenre Research Project: Everything You Need to Get Started*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006.
- Romano, Tom. *Crafting Authentic Voice*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004.
- Schrock, Kathy. “Critical Evaluation of a Web Site: Secondary School Level.” *Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators*. 1999–2006. 16 May 2007 <<http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/pdf/evalhigh.pdf>>.
- Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. “You Gotta BE the Book”: *Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents*. New York: Teachers College, 1997.

**Karen E. Moynihan** is English department chair at Central Catholic High School in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where she teaches Honors English II and AP English Language and Composition. Moynihan also serves as publications chair on the Executive Board of the New England Council of Teachers of English. *email*: [kmoynihan@centralcatholic.net](mailto:kmoynihan@centralcatholic.net).

#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Moynihan challenges students to investigate familiar and unknown collectibles and then to share their research results with others. “Literary Scrapbooks Online: An Electronic Reader-Response Project” explains how to create an online scrapbook. Using Web resources, students capture “scraps” of information about a piece of literature and then create a scrapbook using PowerPoint or other presentation software to share their online scrapbook with the class. During their presentation, students defend their choice of scrapbook entries, explaining the importance of the entry to the understanding of the topic. This lesson focuses on a piece of literature, but it can easily be adapted to share all kinds of research. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=787](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=787)

## *EJ* 30 Years Ago

### Avoiding Use of Multimedia Discriminates against Teens

It's as simple as this: If information is presented through multi-media modes, *more* information is communicated through *more* of the sensory modes, and thus the learner has a higher likelihood of receiving *more* information. The education system has no right to continue discriminating against young people by depriving them of the contemporary multi-sensory, multi-media modes of communication through which they are best able to learn.

Nancy Cromer Thompson. “Some Ideas on How English Teachers Can Develop an Expertise in Multi-Media.” *EJ* 66.4 (1977): 92–95.